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ABSTRACT

French gender marking errors made by 23 Anglophones and 20 Lusophones are analyzed. The observation is made that the errors noted are due to frequent arbitrariness of this particular aspect of the language. It is concluded that the arbitrary portions of this feature of the language are subject to remaining indeterminate in second language grammars, resulting in preformance confusion. It is suggested that these observations provide a contradiction to the interlanguage idea of systematic adherence to principles such as that of markedness. (SR)

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Non-acquisition, ungrammaticality, and the concept of interlanguage

By K. Connors

The early work on the linguistic nature of L2 "interlanguages" in the 1970's insisted on their systematicity (Adjemian 1976, Bailey et al. 1974, Dickerson 1975, Dulay and Burt 1974a and b, Harley and Swain 1978, Krashen et al. 1976, Nemser 1971, Sampson and Richards 1973, Selinker et al. 1975, Wode 1976). Researchers tried to discover the principles underlying the production of deviant and non-deviant forms by L2 learners, principles which would account, on some level, for these productions, for observed orders of acquisition of L2 structures, and for the apparent relative difficulty or resistance to acquisition offered by L2-specific forms.

In this paper, we propose to examine certain grammatical distinctions in French which seem clearly to resist L2 acquisiton, at least on the part of adolescents and adults. We will try to clarify the nature of oppositions which resist acquisition most strongly and to characterize the status of these distinctions in deviant L2 grammars. We will propose that certain types of oppositions are subject, in L2 grammars, to a state of indeterminacy which we will call "confusion". This as opposed to resolution in favour, for example, of "unmarked" forms or forms inspired by any type of linguistic interference.

In a now well-known paper, Coppieters (1987) shows that judgments as to grammaticality and meanings for sentences instantiating fundamental grammatical distinctions in French differed markedly between 20 adult native and 21 adult near-native speakers. The latter differed greatly among themselves in these kinds of judgments and deviated greatly, as a group, from native norms, both in quantifiable grammaticality judgments and in the interpretation of the meaning of formal distinctions. In particular, the author (554) is able to measure the native-speaker : near-native-speaker gaps in the approximation to prototypical native norms as to the grammaticality and the synonymy of pairs of sentences presenting a series of fundamental oppositions. That is, he asked mainly for well-formedness judgments on sentence pairs, each member of the pair containing one member of the crucial formal opposition. If the informant judged both variants of the sentence as possible, he asked whether the two were synonymous. The majority native-speaker grammaticality judgments on the sentences (more particularly, in the cases which interest us, on the two variants of the sentences) enabled him to establish the prototypical native norm for each sentence, and for all the sentences instantiating a specific grammatical opposition. He then calculated the gap between the average

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deviance from the native norm for each sentence type in the group of 20 native and in the group of 21 near-native speakers. In the case of four sentence sets, instantiating four oppositions fundamental to the grammar of French, this gap between the native and the near-native approximation to the prototypical native norm was above 25%.

The oppositions in question were that between the imparfait and the passé composé, that between the prepositional complementizers à and de before infinitives, that between prenominal and post-nominal adjectives, and finally that between the personal pronouns il(s)/elle(s), on the one hand, and the demonstrative-presentative ce, on the other, as anaphores introducting predications. The latter two items would seem to involve subtle problems of topic and focus, and I will not pretend to be able to deal with them here. The choice of à vs. de between the finite verb and the infinitive complement, however, is determined by an arbitrary lexical feature of the preceding verb, and the imparfait / passé composé opposition is an aspectual distinction. It is in these last two kinds of features that we are interested here, and to which we will turn below.

Coppieters, for his part, does not say explicitly whether the near-native speakers (or the native speakers, for that matter) deviated from the prototypical native norms for these oppositions in one direction only or, on the contrary, in both directions. His discussion of these sentence sets (555-61), however, indicates informally that the latter must be the case. That is, whether it be for topic-focus, aspect, or arbitrary lexical feature distinctions, the considerable near-native deviance from the majority native norms appears to manifest confusion, rather than systematic tendencies toward unmarked forms.

Our own research on the French L2 of young adult learners has focussed on production, rather than judgment data. Like Coppieters' work, however, certain of our detailed performance studies indicate that the aspectual distinction between the imparfait and the passé composé, on the one hand, and lexical features on verbs or nouns which are in large part arbitrary rather than semantically motivated, on the other, are only partially acquired. While the existence of such oppositions seems clearly to be acquired by advanced learners, performance with respect to such features appears to indicate that they have an indeterminate status in L2 grammars which, for the moment, I can only characterize as "confusion". The lexical features we will be dealing with later are [± pronominal], for verbs, and [±feminine], for nouns.

We will first look at the question of aspect, however. In a study by our research group of 23 young adult Anglophones and 20 young adult Lusophones who were intermediate or advanced learners of French, Bazergui (in press a: 98) shows that in semi-directed interviews, both these groups of learners used the passé composé in contexts requiring the imparfait and the imparfait in contexts requiring the passé composé. In the case of the Anglophones, this was predicted, on the basis of the fact that the English "past tense" form corresponds to the imparfait in certain contexts, and to the passé composé in others. In the case of the Lusophones, however, these symmetrical substitutions were not expected, since the Portuguese imperfect does not occur in contexts corresponding to those for the French passé composé, nor does the Portuguese form corresponding morphologically to the passé composé occur in contexts corresponding to those which require the imparfait in French.

In a companion article, Bazergui (in press b) studies the use of the pronominal verbal construction by the same 23 Anglophone and 20 Lusophone learners, in the same interviews. She shows that both groups of learners omit the so-called "reflexive" pronoun (represented in dictionary or citation forms as se) in obligatory contexts, though the Anglophones, unsurprisingly, omit it, in proportional terms, 12 times as often as the Lusophones. In addition, however, both learner groups supply spurious "reflexive" pronouns, i.e., reflexive pronouns cliticized to verbs which are not sub-categorized as (even potentially) [+pronominal], or which should not be pronominal in the context. Once again, the Anglophones supply spurious se relatively oftener than the Lusophones, but this less dramatic gap may be due principally to the fact that the theme of the Anglophones' interview required the use of the (semantically) reciprocal pronominal verb construction, since this group had to recount a battle, from the viewpoint of both armies, and therefore had to use such verbs as se battre, 'to fight', in its reciprocal meaning, among others.

The semantically motivated character of some pronominal verb forms raises a problem with the characterization of the pronominal verbal construction as (arbitrarily) lexically determined. Bazergui (1989) reviews descriptive and theoretical work on pronominal verb forms, most particularly in French: This structure in its reflexive and reciprocal readings is of course possible in general for verbs sub-categorized as [+transitive], since the subject is in general a possible patient as well as agent, in the case of such verbs. The pronominal "middle" construction, whose interpretation is passive, also seems to be lexically productive among transitive verbs, the constraints upon it being syntactic: it cannot, for example, be embedded in a causative construction (ibid.: 63).

As is becoming obvious, there are theoretical problems involved in the characterization of the reflexive, reciprocal, and "middle" (passive) simply as semantic interpretations of the pronominal construction with transitive verbs, since the syntactic behaviour of reflexives, reciprocals, and middle passive pronominal verb forms is of course not identical. We cannot do justice to the rich literature on these phenomena here. What is relevant, though, is the existence, in addition, of so-called "intrinsic" or "inherent" pronominal verbs, sometimes distinguished from an additional "neutral" category. These latter pronominal verbal constructions seem to be interpreted as intransitives. Most importantly here, their existence appears to be a lexical phenomenon, and it is not clear whether there is any type of productivity associated with it. It may be, then, that we should think of pronominal verb forms as belonging to two disjoint categories: the semantically motivated (and transitive) reflexives, reciprocals and passives, on the one hand, and the intransitives, on the other.

I would argue that the Anglophone (and to a lesser extent, the Lusophone) learners' omission of the so-called reflexive pronoun in contexts requiring the pronominal verbal construction, on the one hand, and the insertion of spurious reflexive pronouns, on the other, is a manifestation of confusion in the sense proposed above. That is, though the existence of lexically pronominal and potentially pronominal ([+transitive]) verbs is part of these learners' competence, the, in part arbitrary, lexical feature specifications crucial to the correct use of pronominal vs. non-pronominal verb forms, in context, have not been mastered in the course of learning French verbs as lexical entries.

In the light of the above work on verb form oppositions, and of Coppieters' demonstration that even near-native grammars remain massively divergent from those of native speakers, I decided to re-examine the above-mentioned interview corpora of the 23 young adult intermediate or advanced Anglophone learners. This time the focus was on the sub-categorization of nouns with respect to gender.

As is well know, French shows considerable, though imperfect, semantic motivation for the binary gender division in nouns designating animates. In the case of inanimate nouns without the gender-marked suffixes (which are mainly derivational), however, the masculine or feminine gender of the noun must be acquired or learned as an arbitrary lexical feature.

In studying the interview corpora of our 23 young adult Anglophone French learners, I was interested in

(1) the relative frequency of gender marking errors, including those for agreement at a distance (i.e., outside the NP containing the noun in question---agreement of anaphoric pronouns coreferential with that noun, for example). Thus, my gender error count deals with all (oral) obligatory occasions, except on forms of the universal quantifier tout, tous, toute(s), for which it was impossible to decide on the target form. Lemieux et al. (1985) show that in Montreal French, standard and non-standard forms are in what appears to be a very complex pattern of sociolinguistic variation. While standard /tUs, tus/ is rare, /tUt/ can be found in (non-standard) masculine environments, and /tu/ can be found in (non-standard) feminine environments. Our Anglophone subjects are not native speakers of Montreal French, but they have been influenced by it in varying degrees, and for any given obligatory occasion for gender agreement on the universal quantifier, it was impossible for me to decide on the form or forms which should be regarded as possible targets.

(2) whether gender errors massively favoured the masculine, i.e., the unmarked gender, beyond what one would expect on the basis of the greater frequency of masculine than feminine nouns in the French lexicon;

(3) whether the contradictory gender marking of lexical types occurring more than once in any given corpus was a universal phenomenon among the 23 Anglophone learners; and

(4) whether this contradictory marking was restricted to the case of nouns whose gender is neither semantically nor morphologically motivated. The answers to these questions are found in the tables below, though for lack of space I have not listed, in Table I, all the lexical types showing contradictory marking in the case of the majority of learners, for whom this phenomenon affected more than few nouns. The totals in the middle column of Table I indicate that I have restricted myself to a partial list in the case of most speakers, trying to include those examples which answer question (4), to which we will return.

The frequency of gender errors relative to the length of each learner's corpus in orthographic words is presented in the rightmost column of Table I. The final sections of Table set II, the descriptive statistics and distribution tables, respectively, present the characteristics of this variable no. 6 (labelled *m + *f / LON, where LON means length of corpus in orthographic words). We see, from the statistical description of variable 6, that gender marking errors affect roughly 2% of the words in the average corpus, though the mode is only 1% (see the distribution table for X6, below). This of course

is not a normal distribution, with only 23 subjects, who are heterogeneous with respect to the frequency of gender errors.

To question (2), we see that the answer is no. Poplack et al. (1982: 21), citing Sankoff (1978) and Tucker et al. (1977), respectively, indicate that for a large corpus of native Montreal French, the token frequencies for masculine and feminine were 56% and 44%, respectively, while for French types, the frequencies are 64% and 36%, respectively. The fact that our average number of gender errors in favour of the masculine was 15.4, whereas the average number in favour of the feminine was 13.6, would seem then to reflect the relative frequencies of the two genders in the target language. In Quebec French, there appear to be a greater number of non-standard feminines than of non-standard masculines (Vincent, forthcoming), and this may well be reflected in the gap between the Sankoff (1978) Montreal token distribution and the Tucker et al. (1977) type data. Certainly, we can compare our gender error sums to the Montreal native French corpus token distributions. We see from the statistical description of variables 2 and 5 in Table set II that our sum of 355 errors in favour of the masculine constitutes 53% of the error total (667), slightly under-representing the 56% of masculine tokens in the Montreal native French corpus.

The answer to question (3) is of course yes, as we see in Table I. As for question (4), the lists, in the same table, of nouns showing contradictory marking in each learner's corpus indicate that a number of the learners produce contradictory marking either for nouns with semantically motivated gender, or for nouns with morphologically motivated gender, or for both. Gars 'guy' and fille 'girl' are examples of the former; situation 'situation' and action 'action', with the femininizing -tion suffix, are examples of the latter.

Contradictory marking, in general, and that of nouns with semantically or morphologically motivated gender, in particular, renders gender errors puzzling. What, exactly, has not been acquired, learned, or mastered? Are we dealing with errors of performance in the application of agreement rules? The fact that there are, in our set of corpora, also many nouns which individual speakers mark only with the wrong gender suggests, on the contrary, that, for these learners, the gender of many nouns has simply not been learned. The existence and obligatory nature of the binary marking system, the nature of the gender morphemes, and that of the syntactic gender agreement system certainly do seem to be known to all these learners. I would claim that the fact that wrongly marked nouns are not always contradictorily marked in any given corpus is a random result of the limitations of the corpus. Both the wrongly and the contradictorily marked

nouns are, then, in this view, members of a sub-set of lexical entries which have been mastered incompletely by the learner. In particular, he has not learned the gender of these nouns.

If in fact these are not just performance errors, the apparent failure to learn the semantic generalization that nouns specifically designating males and females are almost always masculine and feminine, respectively, and morphological generalizations such as the fact that the suffix -tion renders nouns feminine is puzzling indeed. I would propose that this failure is related to the arbitrary nature of gender assignment in the vast portion of the French lexicon where both semantic and morphological motivation are absent. It is as though the part of the acquisition task which consists in the learning of an arbitrary lexical specification has discouraged these learners from incorporating into their grammars, in any simple form, the relevant semantically or morphologically motivated generalizations. I would thus propose that, alongside subtle semantic distinctions such a those involved in topic vs. focus and aspect markers, oppositions whose mastery requires the learning of arbitrary feature specifications, if only in a subset of the relevant cases, are subject to remaining indeterminate in L2 grammars, and that this results in performance "confusion", rather than systematic adherence to principles such as that of markedness.

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French Gender Marking : Anglophone Learners

TABLE I

	LON	*m	*f	lex. types w/ contradictory marking		*m + *f	*m + *f / LON
1	1386	13	16	carré, octogone, film personne, dessin	7	29	.021
2	1978	22	45	point, personne, dessin, chose, situ-	20	67	.034
3	2077	16	12	carreau, ami, gars, forme, chose	ation 11	28	.013
4	1197	21	8	chose, général, personne, ami, argumen	8	29	.024
5	1304	8	23	carré, film, balle, fin, action, pays	10	31	.024
6	817	2	4	sphère, figure, triangle	3	6	7.344E-3
7	1142	26	4	balle, dimension, chef, personne, rond	5	30	.026
8	1754	14	3	personne, rond, film, chose	4	17	.010
9	1423	1	18	groupe, cercle, film, triangle, villag	e 7	19	.013
10	1765	26	5	figure, film, groupe, expérience	4	31	.018
11	2180	19	17	guerre, vie, école, commencement, ni-	10	36	.017
12	1067	15	5	balle, bataille, culture, fin, personn	veau 6	20	.019
13	1158	33	3	bataille, personne, guerre, balle	4	36	.031
14	1632	9	41	cercle, carré, pyramide, hexagone, côt	5	50	.031
15	1710	28	21	pentagone, visage, chose, personne, fi-	gure 9	49	.029
16	1444	5	5	partie, coin, système	3	10	6.925E-3
17	1689	3	37	homme, rond, forme triangle, point	5	40	.024
18	1099	5	3	carré, cercle, chose, personne, film	7	8	7.279E-3
19	862	5	3	balle, pyramide, mur, bloc	4	8	9.281E-3
20	1475	6	11	jeu, bataille, affaire, rectangle, ni-	8	17	.012
21	953	2	6	triangle, forme	veau 2	8	8.395E-3
22	2402	39	11	figure, personne, dimension, fille,	17	50	.021
23	1700	37	11	bataille, chose, force, général	père 9	48	.028

TABLE II

Descriptive statistics & frequency distribution

X_1 : LON

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
1487.565	427.727	89.187	182950.802	28.754	23
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
817	2402	1585	34214	54920474	0

1

X_2 : *m

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
15.435	11.758	2.452	138.257	76.18	23
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
1	39	38	355	8521	0

2

X_3 : *f

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
13.565	12.489	2.604	155.984	92.069	23
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
3	45	42	312	7664	0

3

X_4 : lex. types w/ contradictory marking

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
7.348	4.365	.91	19.055	59.409	23
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
2	20	18	169	1661	0

4

X_5 : *m + *f

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
29	16.512	3.443	272.636	56.937	23
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
6	67	61	667	25341	0

5

X_6: *m + *f / LON

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
.019	8.664E-3	1.807E-3	7.5060E-5	46.097	23
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
6.925E-3	.034	.027	.432	.01	0

6

X_1: LON

Bar:	From: (≥)	To: (<)	Count:	Percent:	
1	817	975.6	3	13.043	
2	975.6	1134.2	2	8.696	
3	1134.2	1292.8	3	13.043	
4	1292.8	1451.4	4	17.391	
5	1451.4	1610	1	4.348	
6	1610	1768.6	6	26.087	-Mode
7	1768.6	1927.2	0	0	
8	1927.2	2085.8	2	8.696	
9	2085.8	2244.4	1	4.348	
10	2244.4	2403	1	4.348	

1

X_2: *m

Bar:	From: (≥)	To: (<)	Count:	Percent:	
1	1	4.9	4	17.391	
2	4.9	8.8	5	21.739	-Mode
3	8.8	12.7	1	4.348	
4	12.7	16.6	4	17.391	
5	16.6	20.5	1	4.348	
6	20.5	24.4	2	8.696	
7	24.4	28.3	3	13.043	
8	28.3	32.2	0	0	
9	32.2	36.1	1	4.348	
10	36.1	40	2	8.696	

2

X3: *f

Bar:	From: (≥)	To: (<)	Count:	Percent:	
1	3	7.3	10	43.478	-Mode
2	7.3	11.6	4	17.391	
3	11.6	15.9	1	4.348	
4	15.9	20.2	3	13.043	
5	20.2	24.5	2	8.696	
6	24.5	28.8	0	0	
7	28.8	33.1	0	0	
8	33.1	37.4	1	4.348	
9	37.4	41.7	1	4.348	
10	41.7	46	1	4.348	

3

X4: lex. types w/ contradictory marking

Bar:	From: (≥)	To: (<)	Count:	Percent:	
1	2	3.9	3	13.043	
2	3.9	5.8	7	30.435	-Mode
3	5.8	7.7	4	17.391	
4	7.7	9.6	4	17.391	
5	9.6	11.5	3	13.043	
6	11.5	13.4	0	0	
7	13.4	15.3	0	0	
8	15.3	17.2	1	4.348	
9	17.2	19.1	0	0	
10	19.1	21	1	4.348	

4

X_5: *m + *f

Bar:	From: (≥)	To: (<)	Count:	Percent:	
1	6	12.2	5	21.739	<-Mode
2	12.2	18.4	2	8.696	
3	18.4	24.6	2	8.696	
4	24.6	30.8	4	17.391	
5	30.8	37	4	17.391	
6	37	43.2	1	4.348	
7	43.2	49.4	2	8.696	
8	49.4	55.6	2	8.696	
9	55.6	61.8	0	0	
10	61.8	68	1	4.348	

5

X_6: *m + *f / LON

Bar:	From: (≥)	To: (<)	Count:	Percent:	
1	6.925E-3	.01	6	26.087	<-Mode
2	.01	.013	1	4.348	
3	.013	.015	2	8.696	
4	.015	.018	2	8.696	
5	.018	.021	2	8.696	
6	.021	.024	2	8.696	
7	.024	.026	3	13.043	
8	.026	.029	2	8.696	
9	.029	.032	2	8.696	
10	.032	.035	1	4.348	

6